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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: HUNGARY'S CARDINAL OFFERS VIEWS ON CURRENT
POLITICAL SCENE

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: In a meeting with the Charge d'Affaires, Cardinal Peter Erdo, Hungary's primate, criticized the current government, observed that corruption is pervasive, linked the political elite to organized crime and complained of the judiciary's ineffectiveness. He also believed that politicians use racism as a tool to divert the public from more serious issues. Although Cardinal Erdo praised PM Bajnai for banning an extremist group and arresting Roma murder suspects, he indicated his belief that Hungary will improve after the April 2010 national elections (and the expected victory of the center-right Fidesz party). End Summary.

THOUGHTS ON HUNGARIAN POLITICS

¶2. (SBU) On September 30, the Charge d'Affaires met with Cardinal Erdo, the highest-ranking member of the Hungarian Catholic Church. Cardinal Erdo was quick to share his critical analysis of the current Hungarian government and its policies. He stated that democracy and the rule of law have deteriorated in recent years. "Frequently laws are circumvented by the citizens and policy makers without penalty." Cardinal Erdo noted that people are losing faith in the judicial system. "Average citizens believe that the courts do not protect them. This lack of legal protection leads to cynicism when minor crimes are ignored," he explained.

¶3. (SBU) Cardinal Erdo observed that citizens rely on state-provided information to participate in a democratic life. Regrettably, Erdo said, the state shares only the information it wants to, citing an example where two different ministries published conflicting information on the same day. He charged that the government manipulates data based on its economic agenda.

RACISM OVERBLOWN; PUBLIC SECURITY WEAK

¶4. (SBU) Cardinal Erdo believes that racism is not as bad as it seems in Hungary, and that the situation was over dramatized by the media.

¶5. (SBU) On the issue of public security, Cardinal Erdo stated that people believe that the government has deliberately weakened law enforcement to protect organized criminals and gangs linked to the political elite. "Police resources are available when the government chooses to use them," Cardinal Erdo complained. He contrasted the resources

used to protect the Gay Pride March last month, with villages in the countryside that had little or no police protection.

EXTREMISM

¶6. (SBU) In Cardinal Erdo's view, increased extremism is an organized attempt by political groups to distract the public's attention from more serious issues. He observed that the right-wing paramilitary group, the Magyar Garda, provokes fear and unease among Hungarians, "myself included." Cardinal Erdo said he does not permit Magyar Garda rallies on church properties and has advised priests not to attend Garda rallies.

¶7. (SBU) Cardinal Erdo stressed that the Catholic Church spreads a message of tolerance and condemns extremism through weekly Sunday sermons and public letters written by the Bishops Conference. However, Cardinal Erdo stated he declined -- after conferring with President Solyom -- a request from former PM Gyurcsany to condemn racism publicly during the height of the serial attacks on Roma earlier this year. Cardinal Erdo said he did not want to speculate that the attacks were racially motivated because he believed politicians were exploiting the theme of racism.

¶8. (SBU) Nonetheless, Cardinal Erdo agrees that government actions like banning the Magyar Garda and arresting four suspects in the Roma serial murders are positive and promising steps to control extremism. He anticipated that the situation in Hungary will improve after the April 2010 national elections and the expected victory of the center-right Fidesz party, but added cautiously, "We will not be in heaven."

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COMMENT

¶9. (SBU) Cardinal Erdo's views likely reflect his traditionally-minded constituency, compounded by ongoing financial tension between church and state. The latest budget cuts included a substantial reduction in church subsidies. Government support is essential, Erdo told us, because the state loots the church every generation. Political parties on the left accused the church of campaigning for Fidesz during the 2002 and 2006 elections.

BIO NOTE

¶10. (SBU) Cardinal Erdo is the highest-ranking member of the Hungarian Catholic Church, and an important figure in public life as 55 percent of Hungarians are Catholic. He holds two doctoral degrees and has twice done research at the University of California, Berkeley. At the age of 57, he is the youngest member of the College of Cardinals and has been mentioned as a potential papal candidate. He speaks English (although he used an interpreter for most of the conversation), Italian, German, French, Spanish, Russian and Latin.

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